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AUTHOR Lauterborn, Robert F.
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ABSTRACT

Illiterate workers in industrial jobs can endanger themselves and fellow workers by misreading warning signs and can cost companies millions by misreading instructions. The problem of literacy is also apparent in offices, where often dictated correspondence must be retyped at least once because of errors. Of 800 companies surveyed, 35% felt they had to supplement their employees' education with basic English and business writing courses. A major paper company has taken similar approaches to solving the problem of employee illiteracy, with financial grants to education, by underwriting a teaching manual, and by sponsoring reading and writing programs across the country. The company's major program is a series of two-page "how-to" articles, written by famous people on reading and writing subjects and run as paid space in youth-oriented publications. A pretest of the project proved that young people were very interested in this kind of self-help, including college students and recent graduates, and teachers. Surprisingly, the audience preferred articles written by qualified but less familiar people to those by famous people such as television and movie actors. Subsequent subjects covered in articles in this successful program included how to read classic literature, and will include poetry--in spite of a demand for more career oriented articles. (HTH)

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Robert F. Lauterborn
Director-Marketing Communication &
Corporate Advertising
International Paper Company

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READING: WHY INDUSTRY CARES AND WHAT ONE COMPANY IS DOING ABOUT IT.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robert F. Lauterborn
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Good morning.

I learned how to read on the kitchen floor, underneath my mother's ironing board. I learned what to read from several wise teachers and a wonderful librarian. I don't think I ever asked why.

My educator friends tell me kids ask why today.

Oh, not why read in a functional sense, so you can fill out forms and read signs and pass tests -- although we're told that 19.8 percent of Americans can't even do that.

But even more insidious is the question, "Why, you know, read?" Or as my 13-year-old son's friends might ask, "Why read that junk?" Why read poetry, the classics, history, books, the newspaper, for goodness' sake?

Illiteracy in the United States is not defined in the same terms as illiteracy in a Third World country. In our society, not reading "that junk" can limit a person just as surely as not reading at all can limit him or her somewhere else. Nonreaders lack the information and historical perspective that comes from the content, not to mention the vocabulary and mental agility that comes from the exercise of reading itself.

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Illiteracy in both forms is of great and growing concern to people in American business, from owners of small stores to executives at large corporations. Some of the reasons are obvious; some, less so.

This morning I'd like to outline that concern and talk a little about what some companies are doing about it.

At its most elemental level, the inability to read and understand can cause injury and death. A Conference Board study cited one worker who died because he couldn't read a warning sign. And another who almost killed several co-workers when he attached a heavy piece of metal to a machine improperly -- because he couldn't read the assembly instructions. Fearful of just such problems, Westinghouse reportedly fired several young workers who couldn't read well.

Safety isn't the only issue. A worker who misread instructions wasted nearly $700 worth of steel in just one morning at a Pennsylvania company. Another misordered spare parts from a company warehouse to manufacturing lines, which disrupted production schedules and inventories and eventually cost the company more than a million dollars.

How much of U.S. industry's much-publicized productivity problem could be traced back to workers who don't read very well?

It's worth noting here a labor economist's recent observation that Japanese workers are on the average much better educated than their American counterparts.

Industry's efforts to catch up by buying even more complex and sophisticated equipment may actually compound the problem. Where will the workers come from to operate this complicated gear if they make mistakes with a simple drill press? And what will be the cost of correcting these inevitable mistakes, in damaged equipment, lost time, wasted material? "We must remember," said the head of General Electric's process computer business, "that computers process error at the same bewildering speed with which they process truth."

In the office the problem is even more apparent. Mutual of New York estimates that 70% of its dictated correspondence has to be done over at least once because of errors. More and more secretaries have $9,000 mag card machines that can triple their typing speed -- but too many can't spell or punctuate. Their vocabularies are not equal to the needs of the business. For that matter, many have trouble understanding the instruction manuals that come with all that exotic equipment. And what does it do for a company's image if a secretary tells a caller "My boss ain't here."

Nor does the problem stop at the inner office door. Executives complain that new hires from college have trouble digesting written material and extracting essential information quickly, and that they seem incapable of writing clear reports and memos. This results in what The Wall Street Journal characterized as a "bizarre situation" where $30,000-a-year MBA's are enrolled in basic reading and writing courses.

Businesses have had to learn to deal with the situation at all levels. Of 800 companies surveyed by the Conference Board, some 35% felt they had to supplement the basic educations employees got in school.

For example, Continental Illinois Bank in Chicago offers remedial English courses to promising job applicants.

Dow Chemical has had a broad range of courses for employees for two decades, but doubled the number of basic reading and writing courses recently.

Philip Morris has in-house courses which include such subjects as sentence structure, the organization of reports, and language simplification.

General Motors works closely with the Detroit public school system to make students "more employable", as they put it.

That's similar to one of two approaches that International Paper takes. The 28-year-old International Paper Company Foundation made $1.8 million in grants to education in 1980. A large share of that money went to help local schools in communities where IP employees live, and much of that goes for reading programs. For example, the current Foundation newsletter discusses EDCORE work in Maine -- EDCORE stands for Education and Community Resources -- which includes funding a Mastery Learning program stressing basic skills teaching.

The General Mills and IP Foundations combined to support the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury, Vermont for rural and small town teachers. And the IP Foundation underwrote the teaching manual for the "Learning to Read Through the Arts" program which began at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. There's also been a corrective reading program in Arkansas, a creative writing program in Louisiana, a program to assist slow readers in Mississippi -- the work of the Foundation is both widespread and extensive.

In 1979, International Paper decided to commit an additional million dollars a year to attack the problem from a different direction and on a different scale.

The company chose three distinct groups of young people -- high school students who are going to go to college, college students, and recent college graduates -- and decided to try to help these young people to improve their ability to read with understanding, to write clearly, and to communicate better.

We have, frankly, a commercial motivation, albeit long-range. If young people read and write better, they will read and write more, and International Paper is the world's leading supplier of paper for books, magazines, newspapers, and commercial printing. We also share every business's concern for the waste and inefficiencies that poor reading and writing lead to -- the sort of things we were discussing earlier.

As parents, we are concerned about our own children. And as citizens, we are concerned about the human cost -- one writer called people who can't read "dropouts from the American dream" -- and about the very real threat to our whole way of life that could arise were we to become a nation of nonreaders. Thomas Jefferson said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." A more contemporary Thomas, Thomas Middleton said in the May 1981 issue of Saturday Review, "If the Johnnies and Jeannies can't read, they can't write; if they can't write, they can't reason far beyond mere scheming; if they can't reason beyond scheming, God help us all."

So our motivations for this program are many and complex.

The medium we chose is a series of two-page "How-to" articles by famous people on reading and writing subjects, run as paid space in newspapers and magazines reaching that young target audience.

Before we actually began the program, however, we pretested it among those precise groups we were trying to reach. We picked one Northern and one Southern city, to see if there would be any difference (there wasn't) and tested 21 title/author combinations, along with a mock-up of what the actual articles would look like, long copy and all.

Some of the research findings surprised us, though they may not surprise you.

First, the strength of young people's interest in this kind of self-help was much greater than we had expected or even hoped.

Among college-bound high school students, for example, 92% said they would read three or more of these pieces.

That was encouraging, to say the least, but there was more good news to come.

We expected a big drop-off among college students, but it didn't happen. 86% of the college students interviewed said they'd read three or more.

Then we really expected a drop-off among recent graduates -- "We're out of school now" and all that sort of thing. Surprisingly, 77% of these young people already in the work force expressed the same degree of interest.

We also pretested the idea among teachers, because there was always a chance that teachers could say "Get out of my classroom. Who are you to come in here and interfere? Go peddle your papers."

Thank goodness that didn't happen, either. Teachers we talked to were unanimously enthusiastic. They saw the program as a great help -- as third-party support for things they'd been trying to teach for years. One thing they pleaded for which frankly hadn't occurred to us: teaching guides, to make the program quickly usable in the classrooms. We promptly contracted with the Scholastic organization to produce teaching guides for each piece, which we automatically send out with reprints ordered from school addresses.

The only misgiving teachers had about the proposed program was the fear that young people might prefer to hear from the Farrah Fawcetts and John Travoltas, rather than from less glamorous people who might be better qualified to comment on reading and writing subjects. We shared that concern, but the kids fooled us both.

Three of the prospective authors who ranked in the bottom seven were known by virtually all of the survey groups -- but the kids could care less what they had to say. On the other hand, ranked in the top seven were people like business magazine publisher Malcolm Forbes and Ed Thompson, the editor of the Reader's Digest. Only 19% of the young people said they knew who Ed Thompson was (and that was probably an exaggeration), but fully half wanted to read what he had to say about "How to write clearly." Young people respected the authority of knowledge far more than empty fame. I honestly wouldn't have predicted that, but subsequent events bore out the research results right down the line.

One final research finding that won't surprise you, but did us: these are not the flower children of the sixties. Today's kids are tough-minded, pragmatic, and practical to a fault. If we had listed "How to get a job" or "How to make more money" as subjects, they'd have ranked one-two. But "How to read poetry" or "How to enjoy the classics"? Forget it!

Well, we weren't about to give up on the latter subjects, but it was clear that first we were going to have to establish the program by giving our young target audience what they wanted.

And so we did.

Beginning in August 1979, we introduced the first four articles in the program we decided to call "The Power of the Printed Word."

"How to read faster" by Bill Cosby.
"How to write clearly" by Ed Thompson.
"How to improve your vocabulary" by Tony Randall.
"How to write a business letter" by Malcolm Forbes.

The pieces appeared in youth-oriented magazines such as Scholastic, Seventeen, Sports Illustrated, and Rolling Stone, as well as People, Newsweek, and Ebony. They were also in The New York Times Science Times and School Weekly sections.

The schedule is designed to reach 50,000,000 young people every year -- 77% of high school students ages 15-18 and 68% of young adults 18-34 -- an average of five times each.

A box in the corner of each piece explained our rationale this way:

> Years ago, International Paper sponsored a series of advertisements, "Send me a man who reads," to help make Americans more aware of the value of reading.
>
> Today, the printed word is more vital than ever. Now there is more need than ever before for all of us to *read* better, *write* better, and *communicate* better.
>
> International Paper offers this *new* series in the hope that, even in a small way, we can help.

We concluded by innocently offering free reprints. Gulp! We ended up with what one of the company's marketing directors subsequently described as "a high class problem" -- fulfillment costs ran ten times what we had budgeted that first season.

Before a year was up, we had been asked for more than a million and a half reprints of those first four pieces. Requests came from students and educators, of course. That the research told us to expect, though not necessarily in such numbers. However, 41% of the requests came from a source we'd overlooked -- business people. Hardly a surprise when you think of the problems we talked about earlier, but we still hadn't anticipated it.

As a matter of fact, although the pieces are written for young people 15-30, they're used everywhere from nursery schools to senior citizens' homes, in churches, army barracks, even in prisons.

One of the more colorful responses came from a self-professed hippie who requested additional copies "to pass around the campfire" and thanked us for helping him to write better protest letters!

The second season has been more of the same. This year we introduced four more pieces:

"How to write with style" by Kurt Vonnegut.
"How to use a library" by James Michener.
"How to enjoy the classics" by Steve Allen.
"How to read an annual report" by Jane Bryant Quinn.

Notice we slipped in one of the "rejected" subjects -- the piece on the classics. But it was the seventh in the series, when we felt the program had built acceptance and momentum. It worked, apparently. Response has been just as strong for that one as for the others.

Speaking of response: as of yesterday, more than four million reprints have been distributed in response to requests. We're receiving more than a thousand letters a day, every day!

In addition to the program itself, there are some supporting activities: a college journalism competition IP co-sponsors with Rolling Stone; a college sportswriting competition with Sports Illustrated; and at the high school level, a literary criticism competition co-sponsored with Scholastic combining both reading and writing. For the past two years, IP also sponsored a syndicated radio program called "Hooked on Books", featuring author interviews by Henry Morgan. It's on about 150 stations nationwide.

We're also looking into establishing free book exchange centers at IP mills, and considering establishing reading improvement programs for IP employees.

The core of International Paper's program, however, is and will continue to be the articles themselves.

What's ahead?

"How to read a newspaper" by Walter Cronkite.
"How to make a speech" by George Plimpton.
"How to spell"
"How to write a resume"

And yes, "How to enjoy poetry" by James Dickey. (The kids are going to get it whether they want it or not, because "that stuff" is important!)

All of the articles to date are available, of course, at no cost, along with the teaching guides.

We hope you have found and will continue to find these helpful in your work as reading teachers. At International Paper, we believe in the power of the printed word, but it's you who unleash that power -- to the benefit of your students, to the gratitude of business people, and to the future health and strength of the nation.

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